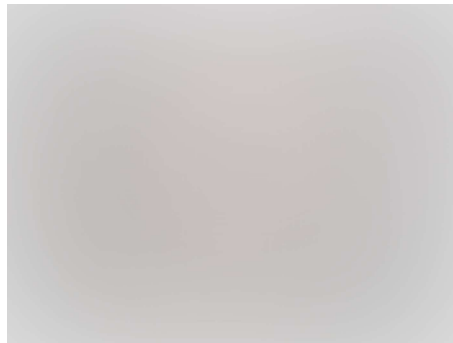


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Inside the Outdoors: Learning the history of duck stamps

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What a great month. Two weeks ago, we celebrated the 95th birthday of our Kittitas County Field and Stream Club. A couple days after that was the 80th birthday of the duck stamp, March 16, 1934, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act into law.

These anniversaries harken back to a time when wildlife and its habitat were in grave danger. We celebrate them today because men and women concerned about future generations — that is us, by the way — stepped up and did something nearly a century ago.

I thought we might review those times a bit.

The 1920s (the “Roaring Twenties”) was a time of flappers, gangsters and rich lifestyles. Urban living became the dream for much of the world, with the wealthy all over the world betting on good times and unending natural resources that few saw fading. Difficult times were on the horizon, as the demand for land and food grew with rapid development and poor agricultural practices.

Midwestern prairies were stripped of their soil, and wetlands were ditched and drained. Such economic progress pushed food production and waterfowl habitat ever-closer to the edge. Migratory waterfowl populations (many species still recovering from market hunting) slumped precipitously — particularly pintails and canvasbacks.

The conservation ethic of leaders like Teddy Roosevelt, John Muir and Gifford Pinchot was nearly lost in that decade of wild excess.

Then came the Great Depression. Markets, Americans' spirit and wildlife populations fell into a deep malaise. While few had thoughts for anything beyond economic recovery, President Franklin D. Roosevelt seemed to see recovery in a more global way — he saw a country still defined by people working the land and by its natural resources. As he worked to recover citizens' spirit, he spoke to the need for wildlife habitat even as, for many species, extinction seemed inevitable.

Still, through the most desperate and hopeless of times determined conservationists pushed forward, creating new bands, groups and clubs of folks looking ahead. By 1934, most talk of stopping the destruction of wetland habitat and the steep decline of waterfowl numbers was still just talk. Finally, after more than a dozen years, and several of Jay “Ding” Darling's nationwide editorial cartoons, agreements and compromises were made.

The Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act bill was passed in March and signed on March 16, 1934. That first federal duck stamp featured a Ding Darling sketch — completed in an hour — of two mallards. It sold for a buck.

Since 1934, sales of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (its name since 1976) have generated over \$850 million, conserving more than six million acres of wetlands and migratory bird habitat in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Ninety-eight cents of every dollar spent on Duck Stamps goes directly to such purchases. The Duck Stamp has cost \$15 for the last two decades. Senate Bill S. 1865, sponsored by Senator Mark Begich, D-Alaska, would raise it to \$25, and it is probably time. The new stamp, due in June, features the common goldeneye.

These stamps are important. Friend Joe Meuchel once wrote that "...every birder should buy a duck stamp. A measly fifteen bucks shelled over the counter at your local post office will buy fifteen dollars worth of some wildlife refuge somewhere. Not just that, it gives you a season ticket to enter most federal refuges and you don't even have to hunt ducks."

Well over 30,000 people buy Duck Stamps in Washington. More than a third of them also put something back through membership in Ducks Unlimited. The 60-plus chapters in Washington raise a million bucks a year for waterfowl and habitat conservation. (You can play, too; call Joe Briscoe at 509-697-4482 and check out the Selah Ducks Unlimited Banquet, Saturday, May 3.)

Ducks Unlimited calls itself the world's largest private, nonprofit waterfowl and wetlands conservation group. Organized in 1937, with more than a million supporters, it has conserved more than 13 million acres of waterfowl habitat throughout North America. In its almost eight decades of existence, it has raised nearly \$3.5 billion.

Nearly a century ago, our ancestors handed us the future. Restoring and enhancing quality habitat for wildlife is a game we are all playing. Let's keep playing.

Find more at www.fws.gov/duckstamps/conservation/mbcc.htm, www.birdnote.org and www.ducks.org.

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